

RPTR MOLNAR

EDTR CRYSTAL

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S POLICY OBJECTIVES
IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Wednesday, June 22, 2022

House of Representatives,
Subcommittee on the Middle East,
North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism,
Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 2:16 p.m.,
in Room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Theodore
E. Deutch [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Mr. Deutch. The Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and Global Counterterrorism will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the subcommittee at any point.

All members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules.

As a reminder to the members who are participating virtually, please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves.

Consistent with House Resolution 8 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

Pursuant to notice, the subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony and conduct oversight on the Biden administration's policy priorities and objectives in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the fiscal year 2023 budget request for both State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and USAID's Bureau for the Middle East.

I see that we have a quorum and now recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

I would like to extend a warm welcome, first of all, to our witnesses, Assistant Secretary Barbara Leaf and Acting

Assistant Administrator Andrew Plitt.

Thank you both for being here today. I am looking forward to a robust discussion.

This hearing comes as President Biden prepares to embark on his much anticipated trip to the Middle East. He will be traveling to Israel where just days ago its leaders announced they would dissolve the historic governing coalition, paving the way for new elections in October.

The President's arrival will reaffirm the unwavering U.S.-Israel alliance that is built upon a long history of shared values between the American and Israeli peoples, not solely by the governments they elect to represent them.

Secretary Blinken just yesterday, following his calls with Prime Minister Bennett and Foreign Minister Lapid, reiterated the U.S.', and I quote, "unwavering commitment to the strong U.S.-Israel strategic relationship," close quote.

The President will also meet with Israeli and Palestinian leaders to enhance the ongoing work to build a viable Palestinian economy and preserve the goal of a negotiated and sustainable two-state solution.

These efforts, reinforcing the U.S.' ironclad commitment to Israel and increasing opportunities for Palestinians, aren't mutually exclusive. They are consistent with our shared goals of mutual security and prosperity.

From Israel, the President will travel directly to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in a move that highlights the potential for additional cooperation and normalization in the region.

While in Saudi Arabia, the President will meet with the GCC plus 3, which includes the Gulf countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman, plus Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq.

This high-level engagement has the potential to usher in newfound cooperation to secure American interests and opens the possibility of deepening strategic cooperation with Israel.

These meetings should focus on stabilizing the U.S.-Saudi relationship to ensure that we can continue to safeguard our own interests in the region and prevent Russia and China's expanded influence.

The President will also ensure that human rights remain of paramount importance in our foreign policy and have hard conversations on a wide array of issues, including human rights challenges which must not be ignored.

I am grateful to the Biden administration for strengthening our collective regional security interests and working to actively advance Israel's normalization in the region.

I am eager to hear more about how the administration

plans to expand the Abraham Accords and push back on countries who try to outlaw normalization with Israel.

Normalization between Israel and its Arab neighbors is not only good for economic and energy cooperation in the region, but also presents a unique opportunity for expanded and integrated security cooperation, particularly as it relates to combating the shared existential threat of Iran.

Iran is the largest state sponsor of terrorism, has called for the destruction of the State of Israel, has launched attacks against U.S. military forces and partners in the region.

It also takes Americans and other foreign nationals hostage -- my constituent, Bob Levinson, the longest-held American hostage, who is devastatingly now presumed dead, as well as Emad Shargi, Morad Tahbaz, and Siamak and Baquer Namazi, who are currently be held hostage by Iran and must, I repeat, must be released immediately.

The regime makes its desire to wipe Israel off the map clear, highlighted most recently by reports that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps attempted to kidnap Israeli citizens in Turkey and across Europe.

The IRGC is, without a doubt, a terrorist organization, and I applaud the Biden administration for maintaining its FTO designation.

Iran also intentionally destabilizes the region by

continuing to back the Assad regime in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. In both conflicts, the humanitarian situation is dire.

In Syria, nearly 60 percent of the population is food insecure, ISIS momentum has resurged, and Bab al-Hawa, the last open cross-border humanitarian operation, is facing a tough road to reauthorization by the U.N. Security Council.

In Yemen, over 70 percent of the population still needs humanitarian assistance, all while the Houthis launch attacks at civilian population centers in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

I was pleased to see a 2-month extension of the U.N.-mediated truce in Yemen and ongoing direct negotiations between the parties to the conflict towards an inclusive political settlement to the war.

And I urge all sides to seriously commit to a political process and look forward to hearing how the administration plans to build off this momentum, strengthen humanitarian access, and counter Iran's destabilizing behavior in the region.

Further, Iran must never be able to acquire a nuclear weapon and must be held accountable for its lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, recently highlighted by its removal of essentially all monitoring equipment in response to the IAEA's Board of

Governors' decision to adopt a resolution censuring Iran for its consistent failure to answer the IAEA's outstanding questions regarding uranium particles found at undeclared nuclear sites.

We must continue to stand firm against Iran's dangerous threat to the entire global nonproliferation regime.

I remain concerned that U.S. policy towards Iran seems to continue to be focused solely on JCPOA reentry, as opposed to simultaneously creating a comprehensive strategy -- that may include a nuclear deal -- toward countering the longstanding threat that Iran poses to the U.S., our allies, and partners.

And I am eager to hear how the U.S. plans to approach Iran's malign influence in a more comprehensive way and how the U.S. can strengthen regional cooperation to advance these goals.

With this trip to the region, President Biden is sending a strong message that reinforces the importance of American leadership around the world.

Today marks 119 days since Russia's unjust and illegal invasion of Ukraine began, and just as Russia has shown the world its willingness to violate Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and commit war crimes, the U.S. has shown its leadership as it works alongside our allies and partners to coalesce support for Ukraine and its people.

As Europe transitions away from its dependence on Russian oil and gas, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine causes global food prices to skyrocket, the U.S. has been and will continue to be present and to help lead the solution.

These ongoing challenges highlight the importance of robust U.S. foreign assistance, and the United States has a responsibility to these dollars to advance U.S. national security goals by standing with our allies and partners through good times and tough times.

For fiscal year 2023, the Biden administration requested \$7.57 billion in foreign aid directly to countries in the region, including fully funding our security assistance commitments to Israel, as consistent with the 2016 U.S.-Israel MOU.

The State Department and USAID will also seek to address a number of pressing global and regional issues, ranging from long-term problems like mitigating climate change, deterring shared threats, and countering democratic backsliding, like in Tunisia, to more immediate challenges, such as combating food insecurity, humanitarian catastrophes, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am eager to hear about how State and USAID plan to use the requested fund to address these important challenges and build off the President's upcoming trip to further U.S. policy objectives in the region.

And I will now yield to the ranking member -- that would be Mr. Burchett -- for his opening remarks.

Mr. Burchett. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate your friendship. And you are not as bad as everybody promised me you would be when I got up here. And I hope I am better than they promised you that I would be. So thank you, sir.

I know the world continues to mostly be focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ma'am and sir, but the Middle East remains strategically important because of multiple national security interests. It is not a region we can forget about.

This administration seems to be remembering just that, I think, just a little late. With his trip to Israel, the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia next month, President Biden, I feel like, should be, 100 percent, he should bring up Jamal Khashoggi when he meets with the Saudis.

And we all agree that it is an absolute barbaric act, his murder, but the President seems to be realizing that making all Saudi Arabia a pariah state, which is what he said, is not a feasible policy.

We need friends in an increasingly volatile neighborhood. And during his meeting with the Saudis, while not begging for increased oil production, I hope the President discusses Iranian malign influence in the region,

including Iran's support for Shia militia groups in Iraq, which routinely attack U.S. installations, and Iranian support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which constantly preach to wipe Israel off the face of the Earth. And I find that incredibly disgusting.

Speaking of Israel, I am glad to hear that the Israelis and the Saudis are seeking to build business ties and create new security arrangements. And it is increasingly heartening to hear the majority of Saudis under the age of 30 support diplomatic relations with Israel.

I think that goes back to my theory if we just keep letting these old folks that seem to run these countries continue, that is just what they will do. They just keep preaching it and preaching it, and the young folks, when I was over there, the young folks, I felt like, wanted peace. And I am glad they do, and I dig that.

I hope this administration seeks to expand and strengthen President Trump's monumental Abraham Accords, and I hope that President Biden discusses the prospect of strengthening Israeli and Saudi ties on his trip.

Additionally, we cannot forget about the dire situation in Syria. ISIS remains a serious threat in the country, as evidenced by their recent deadly attack on a civilian bus.

ISIS' attack on the al-Sina Prison earlier this year reiterates the fact that the situation in northeast Syria

remains tenuous.

By the time the attackers were dead, hundreds of terrorists had escaped, and the administration needs to do everything it can to urge other countries to repatriate their citizens who are ISIS fighters and affiliated family members.

The al-Hawl refugee camp remains a tinderbox and could spawn the next generation of terrorists if we are not careful.

Take all this and add an impending Turkish invasion of the region, further undermining the ability of Syrian Democratic Forces to guard these ISIS captives, and you have the perfect storm for a disaster.

I thank the witnesses for being here today. I look forward to a lively discussion.

Thank you to my friend, Mr. Chairman. And I will say, for the record, that I will miss you if I am fortunate enough to be back here. If not, I won't miss you one bit.

Thank you.

Mr. Deutch. I thank you, Mr. Burchett.

Mr. Burchett. You can give me a fist bump on that.

Mr. Deutch. Yeah.

Mr. Burchett. Bipartisan.

Mr. Deutch. All right. Let me actually first remind the witnesses to limit your testimony to 5 minutes. Without

objection, your prepared written statements will be made a part of the hearing record.

It is now my honor to introduce our witnesses.

The Honorable Barbara Leaf is the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs. Assistant Secretary Leaf has served in high-level positions in the White House and the State Department, including Special Assistant to President Biden, Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Security Council, and the U.S. Ambassador to the UAE, among many other positions.

Assistant Secretary Leaf received her bachelor's degree from the College of William & Mary and holds a master's degree from the University of Virginia.

Mr. Andrew Plitt is the Acting Assistant Administrator of USAID's Bureau for the Middle East. Mr. Plitt has previously served as USAID's Senior Development Advisor at U.S. European Command and as Director of the Office of North African and Arabian Affairs in the Bureau for the Middle East, among other roles.

Mr. Plitt received his bachelor's degree from North Carolina State University and an MBA from the University of Texas at Austin -- to which, as the father of a Longhorn, I say, "Hook 'em."

And as has been the case with my chairmanship of this committee, I am going to yield to the members. I will

reserve my time until the end.

And with that, it is my pleasure to yield 5 minutes to the gentleman from Rhode Island, Mr. Cicilline, for his questions.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you, Chairman Deutch, and thank you to our ranking member for convening this hearing. And thank you -- yeah.

Mr. Deutch. Sorry. I was so excited to yield to my friend Mr. Cicilline that --

Mr. Cicilline. I was about to say.

Mr. Deutch. Right. Sorry.

Mr. Cicilline. Let's hear the testimony.

Mr. Deutch. I think all of the testimony that we have all spent the past 10 minutes or more talking about how much we are going to benefit from probably deserves to be heard.

With that, it is my great honor to introduce Assistant Secretary Leaf for your testimony. You are recognized.

STATEMENTS OF THE HONORABLE BARBARA LEAF, ASSISTANT
SECRETARY, BUREAU OF NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT
OF STATE; AND MR. ANDREW PLITT, ACTING ASSISTANT
ADMINISTRATOR, BUREAU FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, U.S. AGENCY FOR
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

STATEMENT OF BARBARA LEAF

Ms. Leaf. Thank you, Chairman, and I must admit I was a little bit confused. But in any case, Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Burchett, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today and to testify.

This budget request is designed to build regional stability by increasing regional integration, deescalating and resolving longstanding conflicts, and enhancing economic growth.

The region is afflicted by multiple conflicts, Iran's unconstrained nuclear program and malign behavior, and challenging human rights and humanitarian conditions, including the food crises exacerbated by Russia's brutal war on Ukraine.

Well-resourced U.S. foreign assistance is essential to making the most of regional opportunities and to addressing

complex challenges.

From COVID-19, to the climate crisis, to empowering civil society, to deescalating conflicts and ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS, we must build and sustain effective partnerships with regional countries and their populations.

To advance these goals, the President's budget request includes \$7.6 billion in foreign assistance for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, which is less than a 1 percent decrease from fiscal year 2022 request levels and a 1.2 percent decrease from fiscal year 2021 appropriated levels.

The request supports three goals: maintaining key strategic partnerships and supporting allies; deescalating, where possible resolving conflicts; and three, strengthening and expanding relationships and advancing American values.

Number one, on key strategic partnerships, the budget supports our enduring commitments to strategic partners. \$3.3 billion in foreign military financing reinforces our ironclad commitment to Israel's security, while \$1.4 billion in total aid supports our longstanding partnership with Egypt in its efforts to defeat ISIS in the Sinai, secure the Red Sea and Suez Canal, and disrupt flows of terrorists, weapons, and narcotics.

Our request includes \$1.45 billion across multiple accounts in support of the next U.S.-Jordan MOU on bilateral foreign assistance. The MOU will include ESF and FMF annual

baselines, critical budget support, and USAID programs targeting reforms essential to Jordan's medium- and long-term economic outlook.

Deescalating regional conflicts. The Syrian conflict continues to exact a devastating toll on civilians, driving humanitarian needs and risking hard-fought gains towards a fragile stability in areas liberated by ISIS.

Our request includes \$143 million for targeted assistance in Syria to restore normal life in areas liberated from ISIS and create a bulwark against violent extremists who seek to exploit vacuums in security and essential services.

Our partnership with Iraq is integral to U.S. national security. \$304.5 million in U.S. foreign assistance helps ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, promotes improved Iraqi governance, expands economic growth opportunities, and addresses climate change.

Our assistance also helps build Iraq's long-term capacity to defend the country and to fully regain its sovereignty.

Yemen remains one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes, exacerbated by a worsening economic crisis and the war in Ukraine. The request includes \$46.1 million to support the U.N.'s efforts to achieve a durable resolution to the conflict, sustain the current truce, which is Yemen's

best opportunity in 7 years to end the war, stabilize communities, and strengthen transparency and accountability of economic institutions.

We continue to press for the advancement of meaningful progress towards a two-state solution by investing in the Palestinian people, promoting coexistence, building on the success of the Abraham Accords.

And to this end, the request includes \$219 million for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to support programs that improve the lives of millions and contribute to regional stability, strengthening and expanding relationships, and advancing American values.

The global climate crisis and the effects of COVID-19 sharpened regional challenges, such as economic stagnation, democratic backsliding, and political instability.

The region is experiencing some of the worst impacts of climate change, driving instability, conflict over resources, and migration that further intensifies regional fragility and economic insecurity, all compounded by Russia's war on Ukraine.

We seek to leverage U.S. assistance to facilitate new opportunities, develop new markets for expanded trade and investment, and promote greater equity through accountable governance and economic growth.

The request includes a total of \$106 million in

assistance for Tunisia as a key regional security partner, critical to the advancement of regional stability and counterterrorism cooperation.

At the same time, we remain alarmed at continued steps that have undermined independent democratic institutions in Tunisia. The request balances the concerning reality on the ground, while maintaining direct support for the Tunisian people.

USAID will support Tunisia's return to a democratic path through our continued investment in a healthy and independent civil society and support for economic opportunities.

Lebanon's acute economic crisis and implications for the stability of the Lebanese State and the region remain a top focus. We continue to press the Lebanese leadership to implement critical reforms, while supporting key institutions and providing aid to the most vulnerable households.

The requested \$282.5 million prioritizes employment, strengthening public service delivery, and leverages existing investments.

We also support Libya's transition to a democratic, stable, and unified state. The request includes \$44.5 million to increase the capacity of Libya's election bodies to manage and conduct the electoral process effectively that

every Libyan wants, and transparently, and supports voter education and encourages civil society advocacy, the political process, and public decisionmaking.

In closing, while the Middle East presents tremendous opportunities for the U.S., we remain vigilant to the deleterious effects of economic and security shocks buffeting the region.

We must be poised to advance an affirmative but pragmatic agenda to address the emerging opportunities by supporting our longstanding partnerships and fostering regional stability and prosperity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of Ms. Leaf follows:]

***** COMMITTEE INSERT *****

Mr. Deutch. Thank you very much, Assistant Secretary Leaf. I appreciate your testimony.

And with that, Acting Assistant Administrator Plitt, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF ANDREW PLITT

Mr. Plitt. Good afternoon, Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Burchett, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear with Assistant Secretary Leaf and speak with you today about policy in the region and U.S. Agency for International Development's fiscal year 2023 request.

Last month, Administrator Samantha Power spoke with you about USAID's global vision that underpins our 2023 budget request. Nowhere is that work more critical than in the Middle East and North Africa, where people face not only considerable challenges to security and stability, but also the interference from countries such as Iran, the People's Republic of China, and Russia, who exploit regional tensions and divisions to advance their own ends.

Unfortunately, tension and conflict from outside the region further threaten the stability of the Middle East and North Africa, as Putin's war on Ukraine causes global food prices to rise, especially for regional staples such as

wheat and cooking oil.

These price increases are especially concerning in a region where bread subsidies are a key aspect of many governments' social contracts with their citizens.

Further compounding the situation, for the second year in a row much of the region is facing a historic drought, resulting in lower domestic harvest yields.

Against the backdrop of this considerable challenge of food insecurity, the COVID pandemic still lingers. The majority of countries in the region have yet to vaccinate even half their populations and already limited employment prospects for the region's sizeable youth population remains contracted.

Despite the immense challenges facing the region, USAID is well positioned to support those leaders across the region who are taking action. Although our fiscal year 2023 request was built before Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, it includes a significant increase in economic growth funds that would allow our missions to respond to fluctuations in the economy and food prices.

We are already taking action within our existing programming to address growing food insecurity concerns.

MENA countries are already amongst the world's most water stressed, making the impacts of climate change particularly problematic. This request positions USAID to

respond to these challenges with \$128 million requested for climate work, a significant increase over our 2022 request.

Across the region, poor governance, attacks on fundamental freedoms, and corruption act as spoilers for progress. Corruption in Lebanon, brutality in Syria, and democratic backsliding in Tunisia are amongst the region's significant obstacles to accountable governance.

As Administrator Power has said, the involvement of local citizens and institutions is critical to support implementation of reforms and to hold government's feet to the fire.

The 2023 request continues and expands our work to support the people of the region by increasing inclusion, citizen participation, and government responsiveness.

In addition to political reforms, economic reforms are needed across much of the region to ensure long-term economic growth and stability.

Even prior to the onset of COVID and Putin's war in Ukraine, the Middle East and North Africa was the only region in the world where extreme poverty was on the rise.

To take this on, our 2023 request invests in workforce development and the private sector, with an emphasis on expanding women's participation in the workforce.

The 2023 request is the largest ever gender budget request, including \$158 million towards gender-specific

programming in MENA.

Our request also increases critical investments in global health security as part of the administration's strategy to tackle the COVID pandemic and prevent a future pandemic.

Finally, as you all know, the longstanding conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has shaped the regional landscape for more than 70 years.

We are especially grateful for the \$50 million appropriated in fiscal year 2022 for the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act, and we have requested continued funding for this important act in fiscal year 2023.

We appreciate your support as we work to tackle the challenges facing the MENA region.

While the immediate impacts of our work are first felt by people far from our shores, we are mindful that this work is a U.S. national security imperative.

The lasting effects of greater security, stability, and prosperity in the Middle East have large implications for the security and stability of our own citizens, whose taxpayer dollars fund our programs.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.

[The statement of Mr. Plitt follows:]

***** COMMITTEE INSERT *****

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Plitt.

And I will now, at the appropriate moment that this is, recognize members for 5 minutes each. Pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses.

And because of the hybrid format of the hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, let our staff know, we will circle back to you. And if you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally.

And with that said, I will now yield to Mr. Cicilline for 5 minutes.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses.

I want to start, Assistant Secretary Leaf, with Egypt. As with so many relationships in this region of the world, the relationship between the United States and Egypt is complicated and longstanding and obviously a very historic bilateral relationship. But also we recognize the important role that Egypt has played in combating terrorism, mediating regional disputes, and being the first Arab state to normalize relations with Israel.

However, on the issue of human rights, which remains a pillar of our foreign policy, there are still great

challenges in Egypt.

And so my first question is, how does the Department frame the human rights concerns and other challenges to the Egyptians while simultaneously reaffirming our commitment to this really important relationship?

Ms. Leaf. Thank you, Congressman, for that question. You are absolutely right, it is a historic relationship in many dimensions. It is a very complex relationship.

But I will say that we do put human rights squarely into the mix of our agenda. And there is often around the world a creative -- or not so creative -- tension between national security imperatives and the human rights agenda, but we have to make it work.

So it features specific cases, as well as the need for systemic reforms in certain sectors, feature as a regular part of senior-level engagements with Egyptian officials.

And that is right alongside the fact that we do depend on Egypt, Israel depends on Egypt, and a host of other countries depend on Egypt to play its role, both as a good steward of two critical checkpoints of commerce -- Suez Canal leading into Babaro Mendev (ph) -- but also in terms of border security and counterterrorism. So I can only assure you that this is an imperative of our agenda.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you.

And, Madam Secretary, the Biden administration has

expanded licenses in Syria to promote what I refer to as early recovery projects, economic activity that is otherwise prohibited by sanctions as a means of eliminating or relieving some of the economic hardships and providing critical services to the population in the areas that have been liberated from ISIS.

As you know, the line between humanitarian access and construction has become increasingly blurred. And so I am concerned with respect to how the administration is ensuring that these early recovery projects are not benefiting the Assad regime.

And then, secondly, is your assessment these projects are contributing in some meaningful way toward a sustainable concrete political solution to the crisis?

Ms. Leaf. Congressman, what I would say is the following. There are sort of three baskets of assistance or of work in Syria that one can think of, and they differ both in terms of who is designing and carrying them out and who is the intended audience, the purpose of it.

So early recovery is really a subset of humanitarian assistance. It is what we have done for years in Syria as well as around the world. So it is a subset of humanitarian assistance. It is carried out by the same independent humanitarian actors, and it is squarely focused at the sort of microlevel of society, the individuals, households,

communities, strictly on need.

So targeting the most vulnerable, regardless of where they live. Sixty percent of those in need live in regime-held areas around Syria. But it is not done at the direction of or by the government. It is done strictly by humanitarian actors who are independent.

Reconstruction, of course, is an entirely political affair. We do not provide any assistance in that space. We have sanctions against that. And that is carried out by the regime and for its own political purposes.

Stabilization assistance is carried out by a variety of partners. U.S. assistance through stabilization is done in the areas liberated from ISIS.

So it has a resilience quality to it. It is helping those communities recover from the predations of ISIS and be resilient enough to keep ISIS from regenerating. But it is with U.S. foreign policy direction in mind.

And I would say we, in both the humanitarian side and on the stabilization side, we have a set of mechanisms, oversight, scrutiny to ensure that assistance does not bleed over into the hands of the regime.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you, Madam Secretary.

And, Mr. Plitt, I have a series of questions about Lebanon that I could probably get out, but you won't have time to answer, so I will submit them to you in writing with

the chairman's acquiescence.

I yield back.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Burchett, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. Burchett. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for being here.

Is this administration building off of the Abraham Accords, ma'am, and helping Israel deepen its cooperation with the Abraham Accord countries?

Ms. Leaf. Absolutely.

Mr. Burchett. All right. How would you say that they are working to expand the accords?

Ms. Leaf. So in the first instance, what we have done over time -- and I will start with last summer -- you might have seen that Secretary Blinken hosted his Emirati and Israel Foreign Minister counterparts. And the follow-on to that, those set of discussions, was an agreement to set up a mechanism of trilateral cooperation.

The bilateral cooperation, by the way, between the Israelis and Emiratis is going like gangbusters. But we thought it would be interesting, and they were both -- and they were amenable to working on trilateral issues -- religious coexistence, intolerance, water and energy.

Since then, the Secretary was co-host to a ministerial

in Israel, the Negev Summit, which we are turning into an ongoing mechanism, a yearly meeting at the ministerial level of Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, UAE, Israel, U.S. We hope Jordan will engage eventually. We would like to bring the Palestinians into it.

So it is, in the first instance, working across a series of shared cooperative ventures. And so we are setting up working groups right now on water, on food security, tourism, health sector, et cetera, so to deepen those connections. It is an integration piece.

I will say, there are sort of -- so those are the countries that have relations already, new or old.

We are working in the space that is not in the public domain with a couple of other countries, and I think you will see some interesting things around the time of the President's visit.

Mr. Burchett. Okay. Great.

What is the status of our efforts to ensure the repatriation of ISIS fighters and family members? And what can the administration do to speed all this up?

Ms. Leaf. It is an absolutely vital mission. I have had initial discussions with General Kurilla, the CENTCOM commander. I am going to engage with my counterpart in the Bureau for Counterterrorism Affairs.

There of course is, as has been noted, the issue of

al-Hawl, which is both a humanitarian and a security problem, and there are these issues of the foreign terrorist fighters, about 10,000 of them.

We are going to deepen and expand our efforts to get at the ultimate resolution, which is repatriation of the fighters, repatriation of the, by and large, women and children of al-Hawl. But that will be a high priority for me.

Mr. Burchett. Okay. What is this administration's plan to protect U.S. personnel and interests from Iranian-backed terrorism?

Ms. Leaf. Do you mean across the region?

Mr. Burchett. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. Leaf. Okay. We are working closely with partners, regional partners, Israel obviously, and a number of Arab partners, enhancing intelligence cooperation, enhancing their self-defense, information-sharing in some case. We are encouraging shared technology.

We are doing sanctions efforts together. We are doing disruption of lethal aid transfers, disruption at sea, disruption of financial networks.

All of this goes into the mix that target proxy groups, as well as IRGC actors themselves.

Mr. Burchett. Can you give us any insight quickly, within the next minute, into the conversations the

administration has had with the Turks regarding the destabilization an invasion of Kurdish areas in Syria would cause?

Ms. Leaf. Absolutely, Congressman. We have been very clear with the Turkish Government at very senior levels that we expect them to abide by the agreements that they signed onto in October 2019, and that means no incursions into northern Syria. We are reiterating that, we are pressing them.

This will be, in the first instance, disastrous for the civilian populations, but it will also -- it will threaten our critical counter-ISIS mission by pulling away our SDF partners and putting them in harm's way. So we are being absolutely up front with them.

Mr. Burchett. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the remainder of my 13 seconds.

Mr. Deutch. I thank Mr. Burchett for his excellent questions and yield 5 minutes to Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There is a lot going on in the Middle East and a lot of issues on the table for us today. I, like all of us here, applaud the administration for seeking to build on the Abraham Accords.

I am, I think, very grateful to you for the effort that the administration has made to achieve a cease-fire in Yemen

and to ease what has been one of the world's worst humanitarian crises there.

But I think there is probably a consensus on both sides of the aisle that right now the biggest issue in the world, the central strategic challenge is the war in Ukraine and what Russia is doing there. After all, it is the entire world system that we built after World War II that hangs in the balance.

We have got a great plan for beating Putin through helping Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. I am afraid that Putin also has a pretty good plan for beating us. And that plan is inflation and starvation, to change our policy and to potentially even to change us, through the pressure, the political pressure that the United States and every Western democracy is under right now.

And so it is very important to know whether countries that seek partnership with the United States are doing the right thing. And I think this is one of those moments, like after 9/11, when we are in a position to be demanders, not supplicants when it comes to this central challenge.

So I want to ask you particularly about Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. From my standpoint, I think ideologically rulers like MBS are probably more aligned with Putin than they are with us. I think it is fair to say that they have been at least very slow in doing the one thing

that they needed to do, which was to increase oil production to compensate for the loss of Russian oil from global markets, with the result that Russia is now making more money from oil exports because the slowness on the part of our partners has driven the price of oil so high that Russia is making more money. And, of course, we are experiencing, all of our constituents, massive pain as a result of this.

So I would have chosen know a different approach from the President's. I would have taken a tougher line rather than planning this trip and asking for favors.

I hope I am wrong. I hope you guys succeed for all of our sakes. And let me ask about a couple of specific issues with respect to that.

So the UAE, as you know, has long been kind of a notorious money-laundering center, and there have been tons of public reporting suggesting that in the first few months of the war in Ukraine lots of Russian oligarchs, businessmen, people connected to Putin have set up shop in Dubai for a reason, presumably.

I mean, why do you think they believe that this is a safe place in the face of U.S. sanctions to shelter their assets?

Ms. Leaf. Congressman, can I come back to something you said earlier and then I will --

Mr. Malinowski. Of course, yeah.

Ms. Leaf. So I would respectfully just say that the President isn't going asking for favors of anyone on this visit, on this historic visit. He is going to engage with key partners around the Middle East, gathered a whole group of them, nine of them gathered in one place, and then of course with Israel and Palestinian leaderships.

He is not asking for favors, but you can be sure that Russia's war on Ukraine and the devastation that it has wreaked and will continue to wreak, unless we can drive that to a conclusion, that will feature as a major part of his discussion with all of his partners.

Mr. Malinowski. And I have very little time left.

Ms. Leaf. I am sorry, yes.

Mr. Malinowski. If I could ask you to address the money-laundering issue.

Ms. Leaf. As far as the UAE, I am not happy, I am not happy at all with the record at this point, and I plan to make this a priority, to drive to a better alignment, shall we say, of effort.

Mr. Malinowski. Okay. With respect to the Khashoggi case, which Mr. Burchett mentioned, look, I don't expect you to get accountability from the Saudis because that means MBS punishing himself, to be brutally frank.

But I wonder if there isn't more that we can do. And, in particular, a number of us on a bipartisan basis have

approached the administration to ask whether we can get greater transparency on the visa bans that the State Department imposed.

The Secretary, I think, at one point did say that you would be exploring using the section 7031(c) visa ban authority which explicitly is designed to enable you to publicly name those who have been denied a visa on human rights and corruption grounds. Is that a review that is underway? Is that something we might expect to happen?

Ms. Leaf. I will be happy to take that back.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Malinowski.

Mr. Perry, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. Perry. Thank the chairman.

Ma'am, sir, thanks for being here. I just want to make sure I am in the right hearing. What I have got is policy objectives in the Middle East and North Africa. That is the subject. Am I in the right place? Okay.

I didn't hear you talk at all about Iran. And I suspect you are familiar with the fact that Iran is trying to build a nuclear bomb and deliver it ballistically.

What is the policy objective -- I mean, I heard about gender, I heard about climate change -- what is the policy objective of the administration vis-a-vis Iran? Do you have

an update for us? It has been radio silence on this, on the talks, regarding the JCPOA revised. Do you have an update for this committee on that?

And what kind of number do you assign? I heard all kinds of numbers, millions and millions of dollars, about all kinds of things, but I didn't hear one word about Iran.

And I just remind everybody, as you probably watched, Mr. Mast walked into the room missing his legs because people in Iran developed things called explosive foreign penetrators to kill American servicemembers.

He made it out, but a lot of people didn't, and I would sure as heck like to know what the administration's policy is on Middle East on Iran.

Ms. Leaf. Congressman, the policy of the administration is to get the overriding threat that -- Iran presents myriad threats to the region, to the globe, to U.S. national security and its citizens.

The first priority is to get Iran's untrammelled nuclear program back into a box. But that does not mean that we are doing things serially, in other words, that is all that we are working on.

In fact, we have been working on, are working on, will continue to work on a whole set of activities with partners to contain, deter, and help defend against Iran's regional activities.

Mr. Perry. So these are your policy priorities or policy objectives. So what kind of money are we talking about regarding countering Iran's myriad malign influences in the region and abroad?

Ms. Leaf. I don't have a number to put before you. I can get you some numbers. But that is the diplomatic work, that is the sanctions work. In some cases, this is DOD's work.

Mr. Perry. I understand. I mean, but -- I mean, Mr. Plitt -- take you off the hook for a moment -- you listed a number of categories where 100 million there, 50 million there, gender, climate, et cetera. What do you got? Do you have anything?

Iran. I mean, I don't know whether I am the only person in the room that thinks they are a real existential threat to world peace, trying to become an armed nuclear terrorist state.

Maybe I am. But just humor me if I am, and tell me if you have got any numbers regarding your policy objectives and what we are supposed to spend on countering Iran.

Mr. Plitt. Thank you, Congressman.

I do not have a specific number, but we are taking certain actions in particular countries which we believe is countering the influence of Iran on those local populations, whether it be in Iraq, where we are promoting pluralism and

trying to address service delivery to keep people in those regions from falling under the influence of Iranian proxies.

Similarly in Lebanon we have started to work with trusted partners in Shia areas to improve the services that they get, including things like wash, providing solar to ensure they get access to electricity, to ensure that we are not ceding ground to Hezbollah, another Iranian proxy.

Mr. Perry. Yes, ma'am?

Ms. Leaf. The other thing I wanted to note, Congressman, so this is largely foreign assistance. So, of course, the only pot of foreign assistance that we direct towards Iran is really towards the Iranian people, and that is to assist them in getting an unimpeded flow, unfiltered flow of information.

Mr. Perry. So you are familiar with the protests going on inside the country of Iran --

Ms. Leaf. Yes.

Mr. Perry. -- that have been going on and are not widely reported. So if you are talking about assistance, in the remaining 45 seconds here, if you could talk to us about what we are doing to lift them up, to acknowledge their plight, the Iranian people and the threats that they face every single moment if they speak out about their government.

I mean, we have heard all kinds of numbers here, and

you are asking us to take taxpayer money and send it to this. We haven't heard anything about any of this, and it would be great, this is a great opportunity to tell us.

Ms. Leaf. We do have moneys that go to support the Iranian people in the sense of getting them information that they can use to advocate for themselves.

Mr. Perry. How much? Do you have any idea?

Ms. Leaf. I have that number here, but it is a number I would rather discuss in a private -- in a classified setting if I could.

Mr. Perry. All right. It would be great if you folks could provide that information to us, if you expect us to vote on a budget and funding provided by the taxpayer dollars, what your priorities are and if Iran is included.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Perry.

Ms. Manning, you are you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. Manning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member, for holding this important hearing.

And thank you to our witnesses for being with us today.

Assistant Secretary Leaf, you spoke with my colleague, Mr. Burchett, about steps the administration and Secretary Blinken have taken so far to build on the Abraham Accords. Can you talk about additional steps that are being considered to expand these efforts?

For example, are you considering appointing a senior diplomat and a special envoy or a special coordinating role to be responsible for the administration's regional outreach? Are there other steps being considered?

Ms. Leaf. So we don't plan, at this point, for an envoy. I plan to be engaged on this, devote a lot of my time to this. And I know that the Counselor of the Department of State, Derek Chollet, is also, as far as a senior adviser to the Secretary, is very much engaged in this. So there are multiple levels of us who are working in this space.

And as I said, the framework that we have set up, the Negev Forum, is going to carry forth work in at least six different working groups.

This is a start of something we hope to build out. We hope there will be other aspirants. We hope there will be other -- we can put together some other mechanisms even such as existed in the 1990s.

Long before other states had thought about normalizing with Israel, there were working groups on regional issues -- climate, water security, and so forth. And so our going-in proposition is to build on the old normalizers, the new normalizers, and then work to work outward from there.

Ms. Manning. Can you talk a little about the aspirational normalizers? So talk about the Palestinians.

What can be done to help encourage the Palestinians to drop their objections to participating and find ways to bring them in?

Ms. Leaf. So I was out in Israel and the West Bank a week ago and spent quite a bit of time with Israeli and Palestinian senior officials engaging on these issues. And I did talk in depth with Palestinian leaders about the need to be thinking in sort of two spaces at once.

Yes, they have ultimate aspirations that are political in nature. They want a political horizon. They want to be able to see the prospect of a state, a negotiated two-state solution. And of course President Biden and this administration fully endorses that long-term goal.

But in the meantime, what I put forward to them is, don't turn away the economic benefits that can accrue by engaging in these networks that we are establishing.

I think the door is beginning to crack. I am going to continue to work on this space. Because I think the Palestinians owe it to their people to engage in issues like water security, food security, renewables, issues of climate change, even as they work towards an eventual negotiation.

Ms. Manning. So members of this committee have met several times with Palestinian President Abbas and with Prime Minister Shtayyeh. We saw intransigence.

So I am hoping that you have reason for hope that we

can get some movement there.

Did you see any opportunity with those leaders or with other leaders who may be up and coming?

Ms. Leaf. I would say at the top of the leadership, there is a desire, as one of them put it, that this not be -- an interim step like this, working on economic benefits, doesn't become the final step, that this becomes a substitute. And I said, no, absolutely not.

It is a work in progress. I am going to continue to work very hard on this point.

Ms. Manning. Can you talk a little bit about Saudi Arabia? Obviously that is the big fish. What opportunities do we see there? And do you expect that to be part of the discussion that the President will have in his upcoming visit?

Ms. Leaf. So I know from many discussions with Israeli leaders and Israeli citizens that you are absolutely right, this is the ultimate aspiration. They see this as a foundational point of a larger reconciliation within the region and more globally, beyond, with the larger Muslim community around the world.

I don't want to get ahead of the President on anything that may figure around his visit, but I can assure you that this is a piece of work that we are collectively working on.

Ms. Manning. One of the things that we heard when we

were visiting there is that with regard to the initial normalization countries, there is great excitement about the normalization, not just from leadership but in the grass roots.

Do you see steps that can be taken by the Palestinians and by the Saudi Arabians to prepare their public for normalization?

Ms. Leaf. Yes. That is absolutely crucial. It is my firm belief that governments can't just make an agreement government to government, lest you find that you have a cold peace.

They have to bring their people along, and not only lead, but also foster a climate in which academics, researchers, scientists, students, tourists can connect with each other.

I think the digital age provides a lot of that opportunity to occur already beyond the reach of governments. And it is occurring. I have been told that one particular Israeli series, "Fauda," is one of the most widely viewed series in Saudi Arabia.

So there is already this knowledge of each other that is growing in the publics. But I agree, there is a lot of work that the leaderships have to do, and we have some programs that assist with that.

Ms. Manning. Thank you.

I wish we had more time to discuss this very important topic, but my time has expired, and I yield back.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Ms. Manning.

Mr. Mast, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. Mast. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Already in this hearing there has been a lot of attention placed on stabilizing the Israel-Palestinian relationship. I don't know if anybody hasn't asked a question on that.

I want to talk a little bit more about the intra-Palestinian relationship specifically. It has been almost exactly 15 years since terrorist Hamas organization took control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority.

So are you aware of any specific efforts by the Palestinian Authority to remove Hamas from power and reestablish control over Gaza? Or have they asked you for any assistance specifically to say, "Hey, we need assistance to reestablish control over Gaza"? Anything that you are familiar with?

Ms. Leaf. No, I don't think they are in the position to impose. There is periodic discussion, I know, within the Palestinian political community, as well as with countries like Egypt, about reconciliation, Palestinian reconciliation.

But I think it is safe to say that it is not really within the power of the PA to impose itself on the Gaza Strip.

Mr. Mast. But they haven't asked either for --

Ms. Leaf. No.

Mr. Mast. They are not seeking, "Hey, let's supplant the terrorist organization from Gaza"? They are not -- that is not --

Ms. Leaf. Not as such, no.

Mr. Mast. Okay. You know, it is this conversation that really leads me to believe that whether we spend \$219 million of "we the people" this year in Gaza and the West Bank, or last year, or next year, or the year after, they are going to continue to be terrorists. They are not -- Palestinian Authority is not seeking to supplant them. They are going to continue to fire rockets at Israel. And it makes me say it is really wasted money.

And I would challenge you, why is this not wasted money, dollars, by the U.S. taxpayer? Let's put a finer point on it. Is there any project in Gaza or the West Bank -- \$219 million is the spend there -- that would be more valuable than, say, securing our border here in the United States of America?

Ms. Leaf. Congressman, I am going to let my colleague speak to specific programs, but I would offer the following

for consideration.

You know, last year, when the Gaza conflict exploded with rockets directed towards Israel, towards Jerusalem, towards Israeli communities nearby, it was an all-hands-on-deck moment, of course, to bring that to a close. And we relied on countries like Egypt and Qatar and others to help bring it to a close.

In the aftermath, what was very clear throughout the ensuing months was that the Israeli Government wanted and desired continued assistance by the U.S., not just diplomatic assistance but that our programs continue.

And indeed they began a series of economic measures to essentially grow livelihoods in Gaza that would effectively diminish, in a sense, Hamas' stranglehold over money and lives. And that has had an immensely calming effect on Gaza.

What concerns me is you have 2.8 million Palestinians in the West Bank, 2 million in Gaza, on either side of Israel. Economic measures and economic hope do, without question, bring a calm and a stability to areas that otherwise would pose immense security threats for Israel.

Mr. Mast. Ma'am, Israelis can want us to send money to Palestinians all they want. It doesn't mean that we have to, and it doesn't mean that that money wouldn't be better spent here securing our border.

But there is no calming effect that is going on. There have been rocket attacks, stabbings, bombings year after year after year after year.

There is no track record whatsoever to say that there has been a calming effect. That would be like saying if we have a machine gun nest in war and that nest has to stop and reload and put a new belt of ammunition in there, that, well, it was calmed for a few minutes. It wasn't calmed for a few minutes. They are just reloading to prepare for the next time that they attack Israel. That is not calming.

Again, I would emphasize, I believe our dollars are wasted, \$219 million, the request this year.

And I would ask you, Mr. Plitt, can you think of any project that is more worth \$219 million in Gaza or the West Bank than putting it on our U.S. southern border and securing that?

Mr. Plitt. I would say that the assistance we are providing for Gaza is to address the needs of the Palestinian people to -- and also to preserve stability, and to give chance for peace to take root.

Mr. Mast. Thank you, sir. Let's address the needs of Americans first. I yield back.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Mast.

Mr. Sherman, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. Sherman. Thank you.

We all look forward to peace and a two-state solution. The Palestinian Authority curriculum, however, teaches half a million students in 709 UNRWA schools, financed significantly by the United States, that terrorism should be glorified.

It promotes anti-Semitism, rejects peace, and calls for the, quote, liberation of all the land from the Jordan River to the sea.

When President Biden restored UNRWA's funding in 2021, the Biden administration and UNRWA developed a framework for cooperation which requires UNRWA to implement various reforms, including combating incitement and anti-Semitism in its educational curriculum, requiring the neutrality of its staff, and ensuring that UNRWA facilities are not used by terrorist organizations and their staff is not affiliated with terrorist organizations.

I put forward a bill that some members of this subcommittee have cosponsored, the Peace and Tolerance in Palestinian Education Act, designed to address the issue. But it basically just -- the core of that bill requires a report from the administration. I have got the administration here.

What is the current status of implementing reforms with UNRWA? And I will ask for a statement here as to what you have done to make sure that UNRWA schools do teach peace

rather than terrorism? And I will also ask for a much longer report after this hearing.

So I will ask the Assistant Secretary to respond.

RPTR PANGBURN

EDTR SECKMAN

[3:16 p.m.]

Ms. Leaf. Thank you, Congressman.

You put your finger on an issue that is, frankly, a work in progress. It is very much a work in progress.

Mr. Sherman. But we are giving them the money on the promise that they will do something, and then getting them to do it is a work in progress. I was a pretty tough lawyer back in my day. I wouldn't give them the money and then get the progress report.

How is this working out? And is our money to them contingent upon them actually adhering to this framework?

Ms. Leaf. What I would say is the decision to resume assistance was based on overriding U.S. national security interests.

Mr. Sherman. Is it in our security interest to give them the money even if they don't follow the framework?

Ms. Leaf. No. What I am saying is we have to do both. We have to continue to press --

Mr. Sherman. Well, but, you know, we live in an imperfect world. What if they basically stonewall and don't comply with the framework and continue to raise half a million children dedicated to promoting terrorism? At that point, do we still give them the money?

Ms. Leaf. The problem with -- the problem with UNRRA is that it is a principal mechanism to sustaining humanitarian services, education for children who might not otherwise be --

Mr. Sherman. Is that so important that we give them the money even if they are using it to create terrorists?

Ms. Leaf. No, Congressman. I absolutely agree it is a reform piece that must go forward.

Mr. Sherman. Can you give us a status on what is actually being taught in these schools that our money is funding?

Ms. Leaf. I will be glad to come back --

Mr. Sherman. I would like an extensive report. Is it true that the textbooks being used glorify terrorism, promote anti-Semitism? Do these textbooks claim that the Palestinians should control all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, and in effect call for the ethnic cleansing of the Middle East?

I would like an extensive answer to that. And, in the meantime, though, what if UNRRA refuses to adhere to this framework? Do we still give them the money because their role is so important that we are willing to turn a blind eye?

Ms. Leaf. No, absolutely. If we got an outright refusal, it would be an entirely different policy.

Mr. Sherman. How about just a polite stonewalling? Would that get them the money? Because you are not going to get them to outright refuse; they are just going to pitter-patter and --

Ms. Leaf. And, Congressman, you know the nature of the problem, which is that UNRRA relies on texts from national education systems. And so, whether it is in Syria or Lebanon or wherever, that is part of the problem.

Mr. Sherman. Well, the vast majority of these schools are in the West Bank and Gaza, and are you going to say that we are going to support the schools and the Palestinian Authority can just publish whatever they want to?

Ms. Leaf. No, absolutely not, Congressman.

Mr. Sherman. Look forward to your extensive response. I yield back.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Sherman.

Mr. Schneider, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. Schneider. Thank you, Chairman Deutch.

And I want to thank our witnesses, both for your time here and the work you guys do and your agencies.

At the heart of the Middle East, what we are aspiring for is a more prosperous secure region for all the residents and for the impact it has on U.S. interests. And central to that, obviously, I think is security -- paramount security challenge we have talked about is the threat of Iranian

nuclear weapon. And I appreciate the administration's commitment to ensuring Iran never gets a nuclear weapon, but they are, as we have talked about here before, the threshold of having the sufficient material weapons-grade uranium to do that, which is a grave concern.

Parallel with the work we are doing, in particular, today with the Abraham's Accord to build a unified front, working with our allies in the region I think can't be overstated. It is not just to push or defend against the potential of Iranian nuclear weapon and ensuring that never happens, but Iran's other malign activities in the region, and we have touched on some of that -- in Lebanon, in Syria, in Yemen, Iraq -- and that is critical.

Beyond that, you talked about this, the building of the security alliance is far more than just -- you mentioned normalization. When it is government to government, it is a cold piece. When it is people to people, you have what we are seeing with the Abraham Accords. We are seeing commercial exchanges going back and forth. We are seeing scientific exchange in technology. We are seeing tourism between the two countries and the political developments that are happening. So I am grateful for the work.

I am one of the co-chairs of the Abraham Accords Caucus, bipartisan, bicameral. I think it shows the commitment we have here to support that and the vision that

it holds. And I am proud to have led and have the President sign the Israel Relations Normalization Act.

My first question in line with that, the Israel Relations Normalization Act requires a report on the strategy to expand and strengthen the Abraham Accords. Can you give me an update on the status of that? We were hoping to see it on June 15th.

Ms. Leaf. Yes. I am aware that the report is late, but I know it has been cleared out of the NEA Bureau. So I will nudge people when I get back to the building.

Mr. Schneider. Please do. We look forward to seeing it, I think on both sides of the aisle. I truly appreciate the administration's support for normalization. The pending trip next month to Israel, UAE, and then obviously Saudi Arabia. You mentioned earlier the Negev Summit, the remarkable Negev Summit that was at the highest level with the countries in the region, as well as the United States.

Can you touch on what the administration is doing to advance and build on that summit and the hopes as we go forward for more summits? You talked a little bit about that, but I would like a little more detail. And the efforts to bring in Jordan, as you mentioned, and ideally to let the Palestinians know there is a train moving; it would be wonderful if they hopped on as well.

Ms. Leaf. No, absolutely. So, you know, the Negev

Summit, you know, could have been a one-off affair, but the agenda that the partners came up with and the obvious issues that run across the region and, of course, are connected to wider global problems, food security, water security. I mean, as Andy said, it is one of the most water-stressed regions in the world, and Israel has incredible stores of technology to address a lot of that.

So there is -- and these are countries that have found a really an enormous spirit of collaboration developing. So it could have been a one-off summit, but it is going to be a yearly ministerial, but in the interim period, there will be six working groups on tourism, health, education, security, water, I think, food security. I think that was the other one. No, that is seven. But the groups will elaborate projects of mutual benefit.

This is where I see an obvious connecting point for the Palestinians. You might have noticed there was a few months ago, Special Envoy Kerry and the Emirates and Jordanians and Israelis announced a Project Prosperity, and this is, again, one of those pieces that lift up the benefits of regional integration, regional cooperation. Emirate investment in Jordan for solar energy that will provide electricity to Israel and turn desalinated water to Jordan and everybody succeeds, everybody prospers.

So these are the kind of projects that we will look to

stimulate, and this will also generate people-to-people contact, again, that vital missing piece at times in earlier agreements that we want to see fill out the picture.

Mr. Schneider. Yeah. And I think that integration, as you touched on, the fact that it is Emirate money supporting a solar project in Jordan, producing fresh water in Israel that will come back to Jordan. I wish the Palestinians would join it. As my colleague talked about, the challenges with UNRRA and we have so many challenges getting the Palestinians on board; we need to continue on that.

If I had more time -- and I will follow up with questions in writing on the Middle East Partnership for Peace, things we can do there, and also concerns, as we expand, we want to deepen the relationships, expand the relationships with the Abraham Accords. The recent decision in Iraq, the law criminalizing normalization, is pressures going the wrong way. We need to work to make sure that we counter those activities as well.

I am out of time. I thank the chairman for this committee and I thank our witnesses.

I yield back.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Schneider.

I have got a lot to follow up on.

Number one, on this last point, Assistant Secretary Leaf, this is actually really helpful for those of us who

are trying to figure out exactly what the administration is doing to expand the Abraham Accords.

So there are six working groups; if you could just submit the names of those to us. You are working on that. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet is working on that. Those will be something that will be happening that will be in process year-round leading up to the annual summit.

Are there others in this State Department or in the administration who will be assigned to work specifically on that summit process and those six working groups?

Ms. Leaf. So, actually, my Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Lempert is got her hands all over the machinery at this point. She is going to attend what we hope will shortly be the Steering Committee that sets everything up and sets it in motion.

So I don't have the full sort of line-up of people who are to be involved, but suffice to say that will be across the building, and we will get other agencies involved.

Mr. Deutch. Great. Thanks. And, if you can keep us posted on that there, as you can tell, there is a lot of support working together to get the most out of that.

Number two, Assistant Secretary Leaf, I have to follow up. You said, and I quote: We are working with a couple of other countries. You will see some interesting things on the President's trip.

Is there anything you might like to share with us either what those countries are or what those interests --

Ms. Leaf. I really wouldn't want to step on the President's toes, sir.

Mr. Deutch. I appreciate that. Mr. Plitt, let me ask you, MEPPA is overseen by USAID, but it requires an interagency approach. This is something I brought up at previous hearings. How is the MEPPA team working to ensure that grants are driving for broader administration policy in the space, and can you describe the interagency approach?

Mr. Plitt. Yes, thank you, Congressman. MEPPA is certainly something that we are very happy with because there certainly is a need to grow the constituency for peace in the region, as Assistant Secretary Leaf noted. It is hard to make peace if you can't bring the people along with you.

So we are making rapid progress now. As you know, we have already announced three awards. We have had our first advisory board meeting and we expect to be announcing further awards over the course of the next few weeks, including a large award on bridging regional and economic bridges or building regional and economic bridges, which will have further grants. And that is really meant to make economic connections between -- linkages between Israelis and Palestinians and really grow investment and the ability

to, you know, to bring people together behind investments.

So that is the thrust of a lot of the next round, and we will be looking to incorporate some of the recommendations from the board members that came through from the board meeting into future solicitations as we move forward.

Mr. Deutch. Great. Thanks. We will look forward to that announcement in the next few weeks, you said? Terrific.

Assistant Secretary Leaf, what is the United States doing right now to facilitate the return of Siamak and Baquer Namazi, Emad Shargi, and Morad Tahbaz from Iran? What updates can you provide regarding efforts to secure the release of American nationals wrongfully detained? And, finally, how is the U.S. working to ensure that the costs outweigh the benefits of wrongfully detaining foreign nationals for political gains?

Ms. Leaf. Congressman, you have touched on a particularly neuralgic point for me. You mentioned Bob Levinson. I was the Director for Iranian Affairs, the new office, when Bob went missing or, rather, was detained and disappeared into Iranian custody, never to return.

So Rob Malley is working this set of issues for our wrongfully detained American citizens. This has been a long and tortured discussion. I would imagine he would want to

address it in a classified setting as far as where things stand at this moment. But, suffice to say, it remains a paramount priority for us to return -- to get our fellow Americans returned.

And, as to how to scupper future such moves, there is some ideas bubbling around. I think it takes a multilateral approach, frankly. I would like to be part of that because we otherwise risk getting four of our fellow Americans released only to see others picked up and used as bargaining chips.

Mr. Deutch. I appreciate that. I hope you will be a part of that, and I hope we will do everything we can, particularly as I said -- as I said a thousand times with respect to Bob Levinson, and is true with the Americans who are being held now, we have to view these Americans being held as our neighbors and our family members and do everything we can to bring them home.

So I appreciate that. And, finally, since you mentioned Rob Malley, let me just turn to the JCPOA. Director, we were in Vienna recently, met with the director general, Director General Grossi. He recently said that failure to restore at least some portion of their monitoring ability in 3 to 4 weeks would be a fatal blow to reviving the Iran deal, as the IAEA would lose its ability to piece together Iran's most important nuclear activities.

The question I think a lot of people have is, there are two. One is, at what point do Iranian capabilities reach a point where reentering the JCPOA no longer meets our own strategic goals and it no longer makes sense for us to sit at the table hoping that something might come together?

And then the second is, why isn't there a clear -- maybe there has been. I would ask you if there is, why isn't there a clear articulation now, not at the point that it becomes clear that there will be no JCPOA, but now as to what the United States and our allies are prepared to accept?

The fact is, as you know, Iran has enriched uranium, both in quantity and to levels well outside the JCPOA. The claims that they are doing so for medical research and otherwise are laughable given that Director General Grossi himself said, only countries pursuing nuclear weapons enrich to this level. So why aren't we clearly stating to Iran and the world right now what is unacceptable about what they are doing? Because, as I said earlier, it is not just Iran's ability to pursue and get closer to nuclear weapons; it ultimately starts to call into question the entire nonproliferation regime and its effectiveness?

Ms. Leaf. So, as far as the first part of your question, Congressman, I mean, that is an issue for the IC's assessment, and that is not something I can get into in this

setting, but I would be happy to come back and come back with Rob Malley to discuss it in a classified setting, as far as an assessment and when the nonproliferation value of the JCPOA sort of hits the wall.

Mr. Deutch. Okay. And the second?

Ms. Leaf. The second one, so why the administration is not saying specifically to the Iranians it is now fish or cut bait is --

Mr. Deutch. No. There are going to be thresholds that -- there are going to be lines that we will not accept Iran crossing. So we can wait until, perhaps -- if the JCPOA never materializes again, we are clearly going to make those known then. Why is that something we would wait on? Why wouldn't we be clear about it now?

Ms. Leaf. No. I mean, you know, Iran has broken through, you know, many of the safeguards, many of the restrictions from the JCPOA. It is -- you know, it is an untrammelled program at this point in terms of enrichment, and it is unacceptable on the face of it. But essentially we are not lifting the sanction until they move. The ball is in their court. They know that.

So there will be a point -- there will be a point when the value, the nonproliferation value of staying in, we reach that point, but, again, that is something I would discuss in the classified setting. And, on this point, I

mean, they know everything that they are doing is unacceptable.

Mr. Deutch. Right. So the last question I have, though --

Ms. Leaf. They are in a vice of sanctions.

Mr. Deutch. I understand. The last question I have, though, is when you say the ball is in their court --

Ms. Leaf. Yes.

Mr. Deutch. -- after saying that the IC will determine when it is no longer effective, leave the IC out of this for a second. When you say the ball is in their court, ultimately, there are multiple parties involved here, one of them obviously being the United States and whether the ball continues to remain in their court is a decision that the United States and our allies are making.

Ms. Leaf. Yes.

Mr. Deutch. So at what point then -- or maybe you are saying it is up to the IC -- but at what point do we make the determination that we are not going to simply leave it open for them to make a decision at such point given what they are doing in the meantime?

Ms. Leaf. No, no. It is not an open-ended, sort of, till the ends of time, sort of, situation obviously. Because they have already brought the break-out time as it is down to a matter of weeks. It is a terrible situation

and an unacceptable situation.

So it is not an open-ended roadway by any means. There will come a point, and that will be a policy decision for the President to make.

Mr. Deutch. Okay. I have been told that Mr. Vargas is on Webex and, though, I don't see him, I will ask if he wishes to ask questions.

Mr. Vargas. I do, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Deutch. You are recognized, Mr. Vargas.

Mr. Vargas. I apologize. I had to step away for a second. Following up with the line of questions of the chairman, I have to say that if the ball is in their court, as you say, and the break-out time is unacceptable, I think they are going to score -- that is the problem -- if we keep the ball in their court and let them decide.

I mean, I don't understand why we are not trying to galvanize the international community to put sanctions on them. There shouldn't be any doubt in anybody's mind now the Iranians are trying to create a situation where they can build the bomb. I don't think -- is there any doubt in your mind?

Ms. Leaf. So what I can say is that the level of enrichment and the use of sensitive nuclear technology that they are pursuing has nothing to do with legitimate energy -- civilian energy needs.

Mr. Vargas. Of course not. And the only conclusion then is that, of course, it is not for civilian uses; it is for military uses. They want to build a nuclear weapon. Now, if -- I have to tell you, I was not in favor of the JCPOA. I thought it was a terrible deal, and the reason I thought it was a terrible deal is that we kept everything in the country for them to build a nuclear weapon, one, and then the timeline, a lot of these restrictions would roll off and in 15 years, we would be treating them as if they were Switzerland.

So I was very much against that, but at that point, we had convinced the world that we needed to do something. We are not trying to do that anymore. We are distracted everywhere else, and these are big issues. Obviously, we have got the war in Ukraine, and obviously we have inflation that the Republicans love to beat us up on and -- even though it is an international thing, it is happening everywhere, but here you have Iran. They are marching towards the nuclear weapon. I mean, they are, like you said, the ball is in their court. They like that. I mean, can't we do more?

Ms. Leaf. So, Congressman, I am sorry if I led the impression -- left the impression with you or Congressman Deutch that we are taking a hands-off approach, that we will just sort of wait for months if not years.

When I say the ball is in their court, I mean that literally there is a draft that is largely finished -- largely finished, not entirely, but largely finished coming out of the Vienna discussions. They inserted a nonnuclear issue into the mix. We said: No thanks, unless you are willing to do the sort of things that would -- that would allow us to even consider discussing that nonnuclear issue. You know what I am talking about, the FTO designation.

So we are -- we have not lifted a single sanction. We are imposing more sanctions. We are tightening sanctions. So the levers of economic pressure are still there, and we are cranking them up.

Mr. Vargas. But it doesn't seem that we are working with our allies in such a way to crank that pressure up. I guess that is my concern, that it seems like the ball is in, you know, the Iranians' court, and they are doing what they want to do and successfully, I would add, to get to building that nuclear weapon, and we are not doing enough to prevent them from doing that.

It does concern me greatly. I think that they are the greatest threat that we have to our country and certainly to Israel and the Middle East because you don't know what the mullahs will do. I mean, that is the problem. I mean, even with Russia, the horrible situation we are in now, I don't

think they are going to use nuclear weapons. I really don't, but, you know, with Iran, I think that they would. That is why we can't allow them to get it.

I mean, we have to do something more than what we are doing right now, letting the ball in their court. I don't know what the plan is. There is no plan B. Where is plan B?

Ms. Leaf. So, Congressman, what I can say is that we are continuing to target financial and other networks, technology networks that go to the program. That is an ongoing effort, and we have maintained all of the sanctions that were -- that were put on Iran by the Trump administration.

So there is significant, hugely significant, economic pressure on the regime. I think, you know, they decided to add some extra issues at the end and somehow assumed that, you know, the souk was open indefinitely, and it is not.

So, you know, we are at the same time doing a series of activities in the region with regional partners with Europeans that, again, are -- go towards disrupting financial networks, lethal aid networks, disrupting a proxy activities.

So I assure you, the nuclear issue remains a paramount priority for the administration.

Mr. Vargas. My time is almost up, and I do thank you

for your answers, but we do have to get more aggressive. Otherwise, we are going to wake up one day and we are going to find out that they have two nuclear weapons. And, at that point, the game is over.

Thank you, again, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Vargas.

Before I close, Assistant Secretary Leaf, I just wanted to follow up on one last point, which is, since language was drafted and since Iran brought in something outside of the nuclear talks, the IAEA Board of Governors voted to censure Iran for its behavior for not disclosing and for not responding.

The Board of Governors could have gone to the U.N. Security Council, chose not to, but the last question I have is, does the fact that the IAEA censured the board of governors, censured Iran impact the negotiations with Iran and JCPOA and our approach to them?

Ms. Leaf. I think the board resolution as a rebuke came as an extremely unpleasant surprise to the Iranians. I think they thought they could duck and dodge it. So they are feeling the pressure.

Mr. Deutch. So presumably it was -- they thought -- they managed to avoid it multiple times before. They didn't, so presumably it is informing our approach to

what happens at this point.

All right. I really want to thank the witnesses and all the members for being here, for participating today. I thank the witnesses for your testimony.

Members of the subcommittee may have some additional questions for you. We ask our witnesses please respond to those questions in writing. I have got some questions about backsliding in Tunisia, the importance of reauthorizing the Bab al-Hawa border crossing and, in particular, pushing back against efforts to normalize Assad regime that has murdered over 600,000, slaughtered 600,000 of his own people.

I request my colleagues that any witness questions for the hearing record be submitted to the subcommittee clerk within 5 business days.

And, with that, without objection, the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:43 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]